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The Republic of Birds: the construction of the city and the citizenship according to Plato and Aristophanes

A República das Aves: a construção da cidade e da cidadania de acordo com Platão e Aristófanes

Abstract

Carrying out a comparative analysis between its primary sources, this article is about the construction of the “ideal city” in the works of Plato and Aristophanes and their correlate conceptions of citizenship, proposing, specifically, that the foundation of the city, as exposed in the Republic, is in close dialogue and in intense confrontation with the creation of the city comically conceived by Aristophanes in The Birds.

Keywords: Comedy; Drama; *The Birds*; *The Republic*; Ideal city; Citizenship.

Resumo

Realizando uma análise comparada entre as suas fontes primárias, o presente artigo versa sobre a construção da “cidade ideal” nas obras de Platão e Aristófanes e sobre as suas correlatas concepções de cidadania, propondo, especificamente, que a fundação da cidade, tal como exposta na República, encontra-se em estreito diálogo e em intenso confronto com a criação da cidade comicamente concebida por Aristófanes em As Aves.

Palavras-chave: Comédia; Drama; *As Aves*; *A República*; Cidade ideal; Cidadania.

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Taken as dramatic works, as they indeed are, *The Birds* and *The Republic* reveal an intriguing similarity with respect to two crucial steps in their respective plots. One of those steps, of a general proposition, determines the very formal purpose of the plays: both aim to construct an “ideal city” and find in this motive its main action; the other step, of a more specific nature, exposes one of the conditions for this same purpose to be achieved – the impediment of the entrance of poetry in the city to be constituted. It is, in fact, a double gesture shared by both plots, (1) the foundation of a city elevated to perfection and (2) the exclusion of poetry because of its incompatibility with such enterprise. Thus, it is proposed that two of the most famous and most discussed points about *The Republic* dramatically recapture two actions of Aristophanes’ play, giving them a treatment and a destiny substantially different from those we recognize in *The Birds*.

Indicating those parallels between the two works is by no means a novelty, but it is still very common that these and other similarities between the text of Aristophanes and that of Plato are interpreted as simply episodic and accidental, not surpassing a surface phenomenon. Thus, such similarities tend to achieve nothing more than the status of mere coincidence, which often leads the interpreters to refuse any possibility of asserting a formal influence of Aristophanes’ play on Plato’s motives as the author of *The Republic*¹. In the opposite direction, this work is part of those which strive to emphasize that the relation of the Platonic work with the dramatic form, both tragic and comic, is of decisive value for the reading of his work, pointing to a formally literary link that binds it to the tradition of the Greek drama, so that its occupation with the theater would not be exhausted in the kinship that exists between the genre or the predominant form of the platonic writing and the dramatic literature, but that such occupation also includes the formal relation of the Platonic dialogues with contents, scenes and themes taken to the theatrical stage of the time, which, revisited by the author, receive new development².

1 See, for example, Senseney, John R. *The art of building in the classical world: vision, craftsmanship, and linear perspective in greek and roman architecture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, p.103.

2 I highlight here some works that I consider particularly valuable with regard to the referred positioning before the form of the Platonic work: Mattéi, J. F. “Le théâtre du mythe chez Platon”. In: *Imaginaires du simulacre*, Cahiers du centre de recherches sur l’image, le symbole e le myth, n° 2., p. 11-48. Dijon: Editions universitaires, 1987; Kahn, C.H. *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue. The philosophical Use of a Literary Form*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996; Dupréel, E. *La légende socratique et les sources de Platon*. Bruxelles: Robert Sand; Fondation Universitaire

In the case of *The Birds*, the connection between this comedy and *The Republic* is immediate in the factor that triggers the central motivation of the works and sets their plots in motion: the construction of the ideal city³. In the Platonic dialogue, its architect is Socrates; in the Aristophanic comedy, Peis-thetaerus. One works with ideas and arguments in favor of a city founded on words (*lógoi*)⁴; the other operates pragmatically and empirically, never ceasing to be utopian⁵, giving clouds and bricks to his Cloudcuckooland⁶, where, in addition to the contribution of intelligence and ponderation⁷ in its edification, one must also perform the fantastic and fanciful physical construction of a city in the midst of clouds⁸. Yet, it is noteworthy to observe that, well before *The Republic*, the comic characters of Aristophanes had already begun the construction of the city through arguments (*lógoi*)⁹. With regard to this central motto that unites the two works – the foundation of a city depurated of any residue that would imply its imperfection – it is necessary to allude immediately that the vocabulary verified in both plays is absolutely close, which, otherwise, perhaps really was inevitable¹⁰. Furthermore, however, it is important to emphasize another aspect that may be common between the works in the execution of their main motivation: how much the model

de Belgique, 1922; Canfora, Luciano. “I dialoghi di Platone come atti scenici”. In: _____. *La crisi dell’utopia: Aristofane contro Platone*. Roma-Bari: Editori Laterza, 2014, p. 27-53; Pessanha, José Américo Motta. “Platão: o teatro das idéias”. *O que nos faz pensar*, n° 11, p. 8-35, april 1987.

3 See, for example, *The Republic*, 420b, 540d e 595a; and *The Birds* 173-174; 1277-1280.

4 Cf. *The Republic*, 472 d-e; 592b.

5 On the theme of utopia in Antiquity and its necessarily political dimension, including in Plato and Aristophanes, see Strauss, Leo. *The city and man*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964; Canfora, Luciano, *op. cit.*; Lauriola, Rosanna. “Os gregos e a utopia: uma visão panorâmica através da literatura grega antiga”. *Revista Espaço Acadêmico*, n° 97, p. 92-108, june 2009.

6 Cf. *The Birds*, 819.

7 Cf. *The Birds*, 819.

8 *Idem*, 180-185; 550-555; 840-845.

9 *Idem*, 415.

10 Although it calls our attention that the originals are almost invariable in view of the variety of verbs adopted by translations into modern languages, which choose, according to the context, to use verbs such as “to construct”, “to found”, “to erect”, “to fortify” and “to build” for one and the same verb observed in the originals: with any of such connotations, the mention to the construction/foundation of the city occurs almost exclusively through the verb *oikízo*, both in *The Birds* and in *The Republic*. See, respectively, 173; 174; 183; 196; 1277; 1280 and 403b; 433a; 433d-e; 592b; 595a.

(*parádeigma*)¹¹ of the city reflects (1) the dissatisfaction with the decadence of Athens and of Athenian life, an aspect greatly emphasized in both works; (2) that a good part of that model has as its background, therefore, an exercise of depurating the vices of that city, also a constituent element of the scenario of *The Republic*, despite the properly universal nature according to which the conceptual uplifting of the *pólis* is implemented in the dialogue.

In the case of the Socrates of *The Republic*, the conceptual delimitation of that political architecture, aiming at the construction of the *pólis* and the elaboration of its *politeia*¹², includes one of the most discussed and famous gestures of the work: the non-admission of poetry, demonstrated as incompatible with the ideal of a city strictly just, because of its damaging effect on the education of the citizen and, by extension, because of its negative interference in the exercise of citizenship and in the life of the city. The purpose of this work is not to retake the many political-philosophical discussions surrounding the building of this edifice. But to point out that its construction and literary constitution includes its insertion within the theatrical tradition of the time and, in this more specific case, its formal insertion in the comic tradition, indicating an effective and intentional dialogue that significantly correlates the composition of *The Republic* of Plato to *The Birds* of Aristophanes, since the rejection of the entrance of the poets in the city constitutes one of the many acts with which Aristophanes shields, in *The Birds*, his perfect city, thus anticipating in at least three decades the famous chapter of the exclusion of the poets from the *politeia* formulated by Plato.

Before a more attentive consideration of the chapter, common to both works, of the exclusion of poets, it is still necessary to refer, with regard to the ideal *paradigm* of the city, how much it seems to us suggestive that Socrates says that the model of such city is laid up in heaven (592b) which, as a self-reference, should be read as a metaphor for the ascesis of knowledge and for the contemplative gaze that must be raised to the ideal forms, but which, on another plane, that of the dialogue with Aristophanes, seems to indicate a subtle and veiled reference to *The Birds*, in which the city designed by the fantasy and invention of the comedigrapher finds the sky as a translation of its nobility and stature; of its bliss and elevation. Allying two old Athenians dissatisfied with the bad life they have in Athens, Aristophanes develops the theme of the idealization of a *pólis* in which the dream of its foundation is

11 Cf. *Op. Cit.* 472d-e; 592b; 606e.

12 *Idem*, 540d.

directly proportional to the disappointment with the empirical reality of the city, causing its characters to go out looking for an ideal city-state precisely from the recognition of the exhaustion of the possibilities of the present State and its degeneracy, inaugurating or consolidating in the Greek ideology a foundational myth that, directly or indirectly, comes to reflect decisively in all the thematics with which *The Republic* is constantly occupied.

If the place of heaven can be, by comic artifice, strictly literal in the play of Aristophanes, in the Platonic-Socratic argumentation it emerges as a metaphor for the properly conceptual nature with which it is intended to form the *pólis* and the idea of justice that is primordial for the good execution of such intent. A certain utopian nature, however, remains common to both models. In fact, and to some general surprise, the ideal city in Aristophanes is almost the result of a *design/drawing* (*idéa*)¹³, thus establishing another possible and textually exploitable parallel between the works. It is clear that the meaning of such word as “design”, “form” or “model” is present among the semantic layers recognizable in the specific concept of *idéa* in the context of Platonic metaphysics, just as it is equally clear that its use in Aristophanes can not match the value with which the philosopher uses the term. But it is a positive reference to a vocabulary already in vogue at the time of its exhibition (414 BC)¹⁴, indicating a semantics specifically attributable to philosophers, sophists, and new men of science, which, decades later, acquired in Plato’s theory of forms a very specific sense of its philosophical treatment, but by no means unrelated to that original semantics that Aristophanes makes mockery and parody. Curiously, it is the Socrates of *The Republic* himself who will compare his intention to define the *parádeigma* of city through the *lógos* with the office of a painter who would exemplarily *draw* the paradigm, the model, of the most beautiful human being (472d).

Consequently, both in *The Birds* and in *The Republic*, the ideal city can be conceived *as or through* a drawing (*idéa*): in the Platonic lines, that “drawing” concerns the very theoretical contemplation of the idea itself; in the verses of Aristophanes, in turn, this design would be executed by Meton, the “painter-geometer-astronomer” who seeks to scan an urban plan for Cloudcuckooland, the city built in the sky. His intention, however, is frustrated by the intervention of Peisthetaerus, who defends the city of “each and every quack” (1016). It is important to remember that Meton, a historically known figure

13 *Op. Cit.* 992-993.

14 It is estimated, in turn, that *The Republic* was composed, or concluded, around the year 380 BC.

who actually professed astronomy and geometry, represents in *The Birds* the caricature already performed by Socrates himself in *The Clouds*, which was made public in the year 423 BC.

Such parity is reinforced not only by the characteristics more or less common to men of knowledge and of science of the time, which Aristophanes comically and symbolically brings together in a single *persona*, but also textually, since the term “quack” or “charlatan” (*alazón*), for example, is also one of the predicates that the comedigrapher attributes to his Socrates in *The Clouds*. Moreover, Meton is compared by Peisthetaerus to Tales of Miletus (1010), as well as the famous sophist Gorgias (1701) and Socrates himself (1282, 1555) also collect from the comic poet his reproaches and offenses. Meton represents, therefore, a figure that Aristophanes had become accustomed to characterize in a collective and symbolic way, amalgamating in a single character a series of characteristics and mannerisms that are, for him, Aristophanes, absolutely deplorable. It should be mentioned here how much the Aristophanic work repeats, in general, an absolute indistinction between philosophers and sophists, united in the stereotype that Aristophanes imposes on them. In this respect, it is interesting to ask how much the continuous effort of the Platonic work in distinguishing and even opposing philosophy and sophistry is not another corollary of how the Platonic work absorbs – by contradiction – the Aristophanic comedy and with it establishes a literally formal *dialogue*.

With the symbol-figure of Meton, mathematician, philosopher and sophist, one enters the list of characters summarily excluded and expelled from Cloudcuckoo-land. Everyone knows, even if only by vague mentions, the passage from *The Republic* in which are exposed the reasons why poetry is not to be admitted in the *pólis* formulated by Socrates and his philosophical interlocutors¹⁵. The exclusion of the poets from the ideal city, however, is a gesture previously performed by the play of Aristophanes. Of course the question that immediately arises from this observation refers to what such exclusion means, since Aristophanes himself is also a poet. What is it about, effectively, when a poet sets out to expel other poets from his ideal city project? In any case, what can be assured is that, unlike *The Republic*, in which poetry is entirely rejected from the city¹⁶, *The Birds* rather accuses the currently decadent forms of poetry, carrying out a true libel in favor of good poetry, while at the same time fiercely attacking its corruption in practices that do not honor its tradition.

15 The argumentation offered by the dialogue in favor of that decision making is concluded along the entire passage that extends between 595a and 608b.

16 As categorically defended in 600e-601a. On the possible exception to that rule, see 606e-607b.

The list of those excluded from Cloudcuckooland is broad. A first group consists precisely of traditional but degenerate figures, historically linked to the poetic religion of the ancient Greeks. In the case of those characters, the Aristophanic censorship empirically refers to the decadence and corruption of these forms and their practices, ridding the bad poets and bad priests of the city's socializing, in another clear allusion to the morally polluted environment of the Athens of his time, according to the typical view of the comedigrapher. They are the priest (860-900); the poet¹⁷ (905-955); the interpreter of oracles (955-992) and Cinesias (1372-1409), a dithyrambic poet. Still within this group are found the singular cases of the characters of the sire-striker (1337-1370) – suggestively revealed by the scholiast as a tragic poet – and that of the lyrical poet Diagoras the Melian (1070ss). Curiously, after suffering the due corrective by Peisthetaerus, the character of the sire-striker is elucidated and educated by the founder of Cloudcuckooland, being then welcomed in the city. On the other hand, Diagoras will be much more than simply expelled, since nothing less than his death is demanded, for the already conquered fame of impious and diffuser of atheism, in spite of his condition of poet.

Aristophanes' list of excluded goes on to outline another group, which brings together the figures which, from the perspective of the comedigrapher, emerged from the perversion of Athenian democracy, making up that set of malfeasible novelties against which Aristophanes habitually invests with great fury. A sign of this forcefulness, these characters are not only banished from the city but are also beaten up Peisthetaerus and his coreligionists, in a possible allusion to their even more damaging nature to the city than the other excluded aforementioned. The first figure of that set is precisely Meton (993-1019), already analyzed here, being accompanied by other characters of the same kind, such as Socrates¹⁸ and Gorgias, as already mentioned. Alongside those men of knowledge and science, Aristophanes lists other harmful figures of the Athenian democratic scene, whose common profile consists of being related to some administrative or legal practice of political life in Athens at that time. By the way, it should be emphasized that the trivialization of judicial processes (35-42) in general – of which Socrates will eventually be the best known historical

17 Both epic and lyric. Explicit references to Homeric metrics and style, for example, are found in verses 905 and 925.

18 It is important to remember that in *The Clouds*, the character of Socrates is simply burned alive at the end of the play.

example –; the thematization of the perversion of justice (1424-1435); and the venality of the Athenian judges (1100-1110) compose another common scenario between *The Birds* and *The Republic* which, each in its own way, try to disable and disqualify those figures and their respective practices one by one. In Aristophanes' play, the characters that integrate this phalanx perniciously linked to the affairs of the city-state are the inspector (1020-1033); the statute-seller (1035-1050) and the sycophant (1410-1470). In order to close the list of excluded of the play and reach the maximum degree of invention and fantasy – and also of ridiculousness and absurd, elements so dear to the comic language –, the last figure literally cast out of the city¹⁹ is the goddess Iris, thus allowing the final apotheosis of the birds, in which is left, *sovereign*, the fantasy of a kingdom in which the good poet – Aristophanes? –, protected by the Muses and the Graces, becomes the king when marrying sovereignty itself (*basileia*)²⁰. Against him, or in dispute for his crown, the philosopher-king of *The Republic* will rise: if in *The Birds* the architect and founder of the ideal *pólis*, Peisthetaerus, receives the crown of the city when marrying sovereignty, *The Republic* repeats the gesture by *antagonism*, giving Socrates – once one of the excluded from Cloudcuckooland and now elevated to the heights of ideal of philosopher – a such marriage with the royalty²¹.

This is clearly a reply, as Plato himself states in the *Apology* (18d-e). And it is as a reply, in general, that *The Republic* behaves in that which connects it to *The Birds*: the episode of the expulsion of the poets also confirms such behavior, since in *The Birds* it takes place the exclusion of both bad poetry and of philosophy; in contrast, *The Republic* tends to absolutize the exclusion of poetry, at the same time that it not only affirms the need of the philosopher for the *pólis*, but also elevates it to the condition of its necessary commander. It is also worth noting that, with the exception of philosophy, removed from Aristophanes' list of excluded by the art and ingenuity of Plato, all the great enemies elected by the work of the comedigrapher are also the most usual opponents of the Socrates character in Plato.

It seems to me to be relevant to underline that, even if we limit ourselves only to Book X of *The Republic*, the explicit references to the theater of the time and to the festivals in which they were celebrated are extremely

19 See verse 1258.

20 *Idem*, 1536ss.

21 *Op. cit.* 473c-e.

numerous²². Even if assuming the (op)position of reply and of criticism, that number would indicate *per se* the relevance that Plato grants tragedies and comedies and how much they infiltrate, directly or indirectly, his text²³. The reason for such relevance coincides, however, with the reason for its interdiction to the *pólis*, since the poets, distancing themselves from the *idéa* by being mimetic, can no longer support the condition of pedagogues of the Hellenes²⁴, leaving that function, as well as the administration and the government of the city, up to philosophy. It would be for this very reason and in consideration of the deeply pedagogical and popular nature of Aristophanes' comedy – which gives it, by the way, enormous range and political power, as Plato well observes in the *Apology* (18b-20c) by explicitly crediting Aristophanes with responsibility for the condemnation of Socrates – that such comedy can not remain, in Platonic eyes, without a reply that would surpass it. Both the philosopher-king and the poet-king fight, after all, for the crown of pedagogue of his people and commander of his *pólis*, and it is about who

22 See, for example, 597e; 598b; 599c-601a; 602b-c; 604e-605a. In 602b-c e 608a-b we find specific mentions to comedy.

23 In the specific case of Aristophanic comedy, the intertextual relationship between Plato's works and those of Aristophanes has been widely explored, demonstrating how some of the vital steps of the Platonic work were constructed in *dialogue* with the plays of the Athenian comedigrapher: the comparison between the works has revealed, for example, the interlocution between Book V of the *Republic* and *Assemblywomen*, in the same way that Book VI of the same dialogue reveals an undeniable dedication to a series of passages from *The Clouds* (Cf. Buarque, Luisa. "Filósofos perversos e inúteis: o desafio de Adimanto e a comédia aristofânica". *Viso: cadernos de estética aplicada*, v. VIII, n° 15, p. 1-16, Jan-December, 2014; Costa, Alexandre. "De Sócrates a Sócrates: as formas do drama entre Platão e Aristófanes". *Viso: cadernos de estética aplicada*, v. VIII, n° 15, p. 25-34, Jan-December, 2014). *The Frogs and Peace*, in turn, have their presence recognized in the elaboration of the allegory of the cave. (See, for example, Stella, Massimo. "A caverna platônica e o teatro da cidade: o mito do Livro VII da República entre Bacantes, Rãs, Antígona e Paz". *Anais de Filosofia Clássica*, Vol. V, n° 10, p. 33-52, 2011). If the cases above refer strictly to *The Republic* and to its relation to several plays of Aristophanes, the following article by Antônio Queirós offers a valuable inventory of the presence of Aristophanes in other works of Plato: Queirós, Antônio. "Platão e seu diálogo com a comédia". *Anais de Filosofia Clássica*, vol. V, n° 10, p. 71-89, 2011. In addition to the textual references and consequent resumption of content on the part of Plato in relation to the work of Aristophanes, it is necessary to emphasize how much the comic form, understood in its characteristic formal procedures and resources, is present in the Platonic writing, being one of the constituent elements of the literary art of the Athenian philosopher. In that regard, I highlight the following contributions: Ewegen, S. M. *Plato's Cratylus: The Comedy of Language*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013; Buarque, Luisa: *As armas cômicas: os interlocutores de Platão no Crátilo*. Rio de Janeiro: Hexis Editora, 2011; Jouet-Pastré, E. "Le Rire dans la Comédie des Lois de Platon". *Pallas* 67 – *Lectures Antiques d'Aristophane. Revue d'études antiques*, n° 67, p. 47-53. Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 2005; Arnould, D. *Les Rires et les Larmes dans la Littérature Grecque d'Homère à Platon*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1990.

24 *Idem*, 599d; 600d-e; 606e.

among them has the best conditions to form and educate the citizen that Plato's philosophical drama is diametrically opposed to the comic drama of Aristophanes²⁵. For the latter, as it is known by the set of his work, the best cultivated citizenship, as well as the best education that can be rendered to the citizen, derive from the maintenance of the values of the tradition in honor, precisely, of the most beautiful legacy offered by the ancient poetry. It is with regard to the administration of the city, to the education and to the good formation of the citizen – mutually mirroring the ideal of city and the ideal of citizenship – that the Platonic argument intends to overcome the traditionally Hellenic position, of which Aristophanes is, during his time, the main bulwark: ridding the poets of the position of pedagogue and disfiguring them of possible royalty, Plato simultaneously transfers to the philosopher that distinction and excellence. Finally, it is around the discussion about who should carry the crown of the *pólis* and be responsible for the city and citizenship that we find another common trait between the two works: the *télos* of both is the *eudaimonia*²⁶, bearing in mind that Plato's political project regards essentially the achievement of the well-living from two premises that are fundamental to him, the king-philosopher and the ideal city. The issue of happiness as common *télos* and final horizon of *The Birds* and *The Republic* puts at stake the dispute for who should command the city and the citizens, favoring them the accomplishment of the happy life.

Between one *idéa* and the other, between one design/drawing and the other, and between this or that model of city, there is clearly a distinct view on things and also on the political ideal for which yearn, respectively, the two plays under analysis here; in its mirroring of similarity and dissimilarity and in the dialogical game that correlates their identities and differences, “the old dispute between philosophy and poetry”²⁷ rediscovers in this comparison between Plato's philosophical drama and Aristophanes' comic drama an element that is at once common and unequal that unites and distances the experience of the theater and theoretical experience. Both the word *théatron* and the word *theoría* etymologically share the reference to the act of seeing, and can be considered once more, by this confrontation of *The Republic* with *The Birds*, as not necessarily so strange to each other; on the other hand, the

25 *Idem*, 599c-e.

26 *Op. cit.* 1720-1728.

27 *Idem*, 607b.

(in)visibility of the ideal cities designed by *The Republic* and by *The Birds* acts as an exemplary nuance of their distinction, exemplifying how much the comic-theatrical vision of Aristophanes and the theoretical-philosophical vision of the Platonic drama can also move away from one another.

I believe that the collection carried out here, still at a preliminary stage, is sufficient to ensure at least that there are more than “mere coincidences” binding *The Republic* to *The Birds*. And that to continue this critical comparison of the relation of the Platonic writing to the form, acts and scenes of the dramatic poetry of his time constitutes an interpretative and methodological procedure capable of greatly enhancing our analyses and our understanding of his work.

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